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ABSTRACT

Grading is at best a problem. Many kinds of grading have been attempted using letters, numbers, words, etc. The letter-grade techniques (typically including A,B,C,D,F) have been the most common in the United States, especially in high school and college. However, some students and faculty have been disenchanted with such techniques. Hence, other grading procedures have been tried, e.g., pass/fail and credit/no credit. In this paper, representative-data (references) are reported concerning pass/fail techniques. ERIC (CIJE and RIE) bibliographies are readily obtainable. For readers who wish to avoid the tedium of compiling bibliographies, there are on-line and off-line computer services available. An 11-item bibliography is included. (Author)

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# PASS/FAIL GRADING:

# SUMMARY AND TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

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## Abstract

Grading is at best a problem. Many kinds of grading have been attempted using letters, numbers, words, etc. The letter-grade techniques (typically including A, B, C, D, F) have been the most common in the United States, especially in high school and college. However, some students and faculty have been disenchanted with such techniques. Hence, other grading procedures have been tried, e.g., pass/fail and credit/no credit.

In this paper, representative-data (references) are reported concerning pass/fail techniques. ERIC (CIJE and RIE) bibliographies are readily obtainable. For readers who wish to avoid the tedium of compiling bibliographies, there are on-line and off-line computer services available.

In considering the information and data available, it becomes obvious that pass/fail grading is not "the best of all possible worlds." (Voltaire, Candide, Chap. 6) But, then, what is?

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Traditional grading practices have been faulted for: 1) their emphasis on information rather than understanding; 2) their emphasis on competition rather than appreciation, i.e., extrinsic rather than intrinsic rewards; 3) their emphasis on quantity rather than quality; 4) their inconsistency, i.e., different instructors use different grading standards; 5)deciding the fate of a student in the classroom; 6) encouraging students to stay within the security of their major specializations and discouraging them from exploring the academically unfamiliar; 7) their uselessness, i.e., grades, except as predictors of future academic work, cannot be meaningfully correlated with success in life; 8) being used, in some instances, to regulate participation in non-academic extracurricular activities; 9) hindering teaching and fostering cheating; and 10) reflecting the simple skills of conformity or memory rather than creativity.

One of the more popular forms of grading, which has, and is, being tried, is pass/fail grading. Advocates of pass/fail grading say the system: 1) allows students to become more involved because they are relieved of pressure and competition; 2) allows students to take courses, for the value of the cultural exposure and/or intellectual curiosity, without fear of reducing their grade point average (GPA); 3) relieves the "enforcing" aspects of traditional grading, allows the student to mature, and demands that schools and teachers develop cognitively-consonant and academically-motivating program; 4) allows students to de-emphasize, without penalty, aspects of a course or even entire courses that do not interest them, thus, students can apportion their time as they wish; 5) frees the classroom from the tyranny of

grades; 6) eliminates the necessity of having to "learn" how to do well on tests of individual professors; and 7) removes the penalty of evaluation from creative students who may be excessively penalized by traditional A-F policies.

The critics of pass/fail grading argue that such a system: 1) deprives students of incentive; 2) deprives teachers of a system for promoting a higher level of student effort, discipline, or social behavior; 3) is unrealistic because real life is competitive, and therefore, is not educating students efficiently for life in the real world; 4) denies that academic abilities follow a Gaussian curve; 5) shields less capable students from a knowledge of their true expectations, thereby, only postpones their adjustment to reality; and 6) does not maintain academic standards, i.e., mediocrity becomes the standard as pass/fail courses are a haven for lazy, incompetent students.

Much of the literature related to pass/fail grading discusses various ways the system has been or could be implemented. For example, one pass/fail system proposed by Hyman (1969) would use pass/fail grading in all courses, and letter grades ("the only grades that would really count") for departmental exams. This would allow for maintaining academic standards and rewarding competence, while freeing the classroom from determining a student's fate on the basis of a grade. At first glance, this may seem like a clever system. However, such a system would have the effect of making the university grading more tyrannical than ever (basing a student's fate on one examination grade).

In other pass/fail varieties commonly offered (Cotlove, 1970;

Johnson, 1970; Quann, 1970), singly or in combination: 1) students are allowed to take only non-major or elective courses pass/fail; 2) students are allowed to take only one pass/fail course per semester with a total of only 4-8 pass/fail courses during one's undergraduate career; 3) only certain undergraduates are allowed the pass/fail option, e.g., limited to upper classmen and/or persons with GPA's of 2.5 and higher; and 4) professors mark students with traditional grades (they have no knowledge of which students, if any, elected the pass/fail option) and the registrar transforms the grades to pass or fail. Typically, "A"-"D" is considered a "pass," but some schools use "A"-"C" as "pass." In some cases, a "fail" grade will have no effect on the student's grade point average. The decision to adopt pass/fail grading within the university system is made firstly, by the administrators, secondly, by the professors, and thirdly, by the students.

Although pass/fail grading has been enthusiastically endorsed, there are relatively few studies which attempt to objectively evaluate the pass/fail system. Of the studies which attempt this, most of the pass/fail systems evaluated are partial systems, i.e., students can take only one pass/fail course at a time--the remaining courses taken during that semester are graded traditionally. Partial pass/fail systems consistently find that students electing the pass/fail option get significantly poorer grades in their pass/fail courses as compared to their competitively graded courses (Melville & Stamm, 1967; Karlins, et al., 1969; Johnson, 1970; Sgan, 1970; Gold, et al., 1971). Also, students tend to do equally well in their yearly grade point average regardless of whether or not they exercise their pass/fail option (Melville & Stamm, 1967; Karlins, et al., 1969). Thus, while students say they elect pass/fail courses for

interest and to allow for additional "study" time, it appears the pass/fail option is used to provide extra "free" time, which is not directed toward other competitively graded courses. This view is reinforced by the facts that: 1) students most often take required courses under the pass/fail option (Melville & Stamm, 1967; Stallings, et al., 1969; Johnson, 1970; Sgan, 1970); 2) students elect as pass/fail choices, courses in which they anticipate low grades (Gold, et al., 1971); and 3) students favor pass/fail grading because they dislike competition, tests, and study (Priest, 1971).

The problem with partial pass/fail grading systems is that they seem to invite students to take courses to provide extra time and, thus, relieve some of the pressures placed on students. But these systems still encourage competition and really place a greater emphasis on a fewer number of grades. For typically, in partial pass/fail systems, a student's GPA is based on the traditionally graded courses, while the grade in a pass/fail course takes on a kind of ethereal quality. Although the pass/fail course grade is supposedly averaged into the GPA, it is like trying to add apples to oranges when the only ones that "count" are the oranges.

Of the ten articles considered in this report, only one evaluated a complete pass/fail system, i.e., all courses taken by the student during the semester were on a pass/fail basis. Gold, et al. (1971), in a very well designed study, compared complete pass/fail, partial pass/fail, and traditional grading systems. It was found that students preferred the idea of partial pass/fail grading over the other two grading systems. It was also found that complete pass/fail grading led to a decline in academic performance. And even after returning to conventional grading the former students, who had taken all courses

pass/fail for one year, continued to get significantly lower grades than the controls. The authors posit, on the basis of the results, that to students who have been extrinsically motivated throughout their high school education, pass/fail grading may represent only an escape from serious study. For this reason, pass/fail grading might prove more beneficial if instituted earlier in the student's career. The question then becomes when should pass/fail grading be introduced? Should a student know anything other than pass/fail grading, etc.?

One of the problems with evaluating pass/fail grading is that one is really speaking of a bifurcated system based on traditional grading standards. It appears that pass/fail grading may simply be a "horse of a different color," i.e., although there is a difference in nomenclature, there is no real difference in philosophy. After all, a "pass" still means an "A," "B," "C," and sometimes "D," and a "fail" still means an "F," and sometimes "D." But what do these letters mean? How does one interpret them? For example, most of the articles reviewed did not designate whether or not a pass/fail "F" would be averaged into the GPA. Considering this variable, one could speak of other bifurcated systems, vis., "pass/no pass" and "credit/no credit". These other systems, as yet, have not been well researched.

It is interesting to note that many universities endorse pass/fail grading, but the techniques are conservatively applied. Consequently, it is difficult to determine if the option is provided as "a panacea to cure the ills of traditional grading or a placebo to placate restive students and faculty (Quann, 1970, p. 79)."

In summary, pass/fail grading (as used by various universities) still seems to be measuring students by the traditional grading system. One must remember that any grading system only measures performance, not learning. The theoretical assumption of pass/fail grading is that students will learn more because they are interested and motivated, but how can this be measured?

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